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ABSTRACT

An alternative approach to the teaching of literature views the reading of a poem, short story, novel, or other literary work as an opportunity for a person to create his or her own immediate response. The approach suggests that there is no constant, objective meaning for a piece of literature, only individual responses reflecting the personalities of the respondents and the influences of the cultures in which they live. Under this approach the role of the literature teacher becomes that of a resource person who can show others how to create personal responses to literature. Following this line of thinking, a study was conducted to see how students respond to literature personally, subjectively, and emotionally. The subjects, five relatively untrained readers, two boys and three girls, 15 and 16 years old, were asked to read a new poem aloud, interpret it, and tape record that interpretation. The taped responses were then analyzed in two ways: sticking points in the poem were studied to see the various approaches used by different readers to try and decipher the poem's meaning, and the detailed response of a single reader was studied to see how the subject's mind functioned as she worked her way through the poem. The findings suggest that (1) the process of reading a poem is not a simple, linear, instantaneous task--rereading is necessary to become familiar with the text; (2) few students have any concept of how to approach reading a poem; (3) individuals respond differently to the same poem; and (4) there are about as many responses to a complex and sophisticated poem as there are students in a class. (RBW)

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The Process of Responding to Poetry: High School Students Read Poetry

Robert W. Blake and Anna Lunn

In this paper, we shall relate what we learned from several adolescents--particularly one perceptive young lady named Emily--about the process they went through as they read a poem they had never seen before. In this study, we were concerned not with what kind of critical essays they could produce--written products--but with what mental and emotional experiences they followed--the processes--as they met, perceived, and reported their encounters with a new poem.

Background

Before we continue with an account of the study and implications, we need to sketch out a brief background in reading, responding, and teaching literature. It seems to us that the single most powerful influence on teaching literature has been that of the New Criticism (sometimes called Formalistic Criticism and which is often mistakenly lumped together with other approaches under the label of Objective Criticism) of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. If we read a poem as a New Critic, we are implicitly guided by assumptions like these: interpretation means discovering the objective meaning of a piece, determining the author's intended meaning, and reading and responding objectively to the piece itself, not to the biography of the writer or to the cultural or social history of the time in which it was

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created. As prospective English teachers were trained to read literature by this approach, it seemed to us, they were then, in several formal and many less formal ways, annointed as teachers of literature. This ordination meant that they had had the necessary special training for extracting meaning from a piece of literature, had been sanctioned as bona fide literary critics, and knew they now served their students as the final arbiters of the meaning of pieces of literature. Such training has apparently been successful for generations, for by it students in secondary school English classes assimilated the accepted technical apparatus for reading a piece of literature while at the same time accepting the fact that the "correct" meaning for a piece rested ultimately in their teachers' hands. A heady situation for English teachers but a rather frustrating and not so exciting a one for students.

Over the years, as we both taught literature to high school students and instructed undergraduate and graduate college students in how to read literature as new critics, we have been irked, more and more frequently, by the interpretations--often logical, well substantiated, and strongly held--by our students, which we, amazingly enough, had never thought of and which therefore, we assumed could not possibly be correct.

We have been helped to broaden our tolerance for student responses by the work of Alan Purves, and others, which assisted us in understanding the broad range of responses individuals can make to a piece of literature, but it wasn't until we read and listened to individuals like Louise Rosenblatt, Norman Holland, and David Bleich did we begin to realize that there might be more to reading a piece of literature than determining--by no matter how careful a reading--what the "objective"

meaning of a piece was. Rosenblatt said to us that reading literature was essentially a transaction between the piece and the reader and distinguished between efferent reading, to gain knowledge, and aesthetic reading, to recreate an emotional experience. Holland maintained that every person responded to a piece according to his or her highly idiosyncratic, individual nature. And David Bleich advanced this revolutionary idea--most persuasively for us--about reading literature: there is no such thing as a single, objective, unchanging meaning for a piece, and therefore an individual reads literature not to arrive at an objective meaning--or at the intended meaning of the author--but to create his own personal interpretation for a novel, short story, or poem.

What did we make of such notions? That, it seemed to us, reading a piece of literature was an opportunity for a person to create his own immediate response. That there was no constant, objective meaning for a piece, only individual responses, reflecting the personalities of the respondents and the influences of the culture in which they lived. (Unfortunately, there is not space within this paper to consider the enormously useful idea, advanced by Bleich, of the "communal" response, by which groups, small and large, create consensus about a piece.) And that, therefore, the role of the teacher of literature, it seemed logical, was not to serve as the arbiter of meaning and taste but rather was to act as a specially trained and sensitive person who could show others how to create rich, fully detailed, persuasive, yet confidently personal responses to literature.

If individuals, unhampered by the restrictions of distorted objective criticism, actually did read and respond to literature personally, subjectively, and emotionally, what was the nature of this process?

Instead of looking at what students wrote about a piece after they had read it, why not try to find out what they actually did throughout the process of reading an unfamiliar poem in a non-directive and non-threatening situation? No one we knew of had attended to this question with high school students even though some had worked with especially educated adults. The most fully realized study of perception of poetry is that of Eugene Kintgen, who asked very highly trained readers, eight graduate students in an English doctoral program and eight professors of English, to read a poem they had never seen before and as they did so to talk into a tape recorder all of their thoughts and activities (looking up a word in a dictionary, for instance) as they read and tried to come to a sense of a poem.

Rather than analyze what "experienced" readers--the "professional team players and the promising amateurs" of Kintgen's study--did as they read a poem, we wanted to discover what relatively untrained readers--in this case, two boys and three girls, fifteen and sixteen years old, from the same suburban high school but with different English teachers--did as they followed the process of reading a new poem.

The Study

We chose a poem which was unknown to the students but which they could relate to, "Every Good Boy Does Fine," by David Wagoner. Although it had a simple, traditional structure, with few challenging words and simple allusions, the poem did present some complex syntactic problems and would, we believed, provide a challenge to the readers. Here is the poem.

EVERY GOOD BOY DOES FINE

I practiced my cornet in a cold garage
Where I could blast it till the oil in drums
Boomed back; tossed free-throws till I couldn't move my thumbs;
Sprinted through tires, tackling a headless dummy.

In my first contest, playing a wobbly solo,
I blew up in the coda, alone on stage,
And twisting like my hand-tied necktie, saw the judge
Letting my silence dwindle down his scale.

At my first basketball game, gangling away from home
A hundred miles by bus to a dressing room,
Under the showering voice of the coach, I stood in a towel,
Having forgotten shoes, socks, uniform.

In my first football game, the first play under the lights
I intercepted a pass. For seventy yards, I ran
Through music and squeals, surging, lifting my cleats,
Only to be brought down by the safety man.

I took my second chances with less care, but in dreams
I saw the bald judge slumped in the front row,
The coach and team at the doorway, the safety man
Galloping loud at my heels. They watch me now.

You who have always horned your way through passages,
Sat safe on the bench while some came naked to court,
Slipped out of arms to win in the long run,
Consider this poem a failure, sprawling flat on a page.

—David Wagoner

In order to remove the students from the school setting, we had the taping done entirely in Mrs. Lunn's home. She explained to the readers what was being requested of them, with no special vocabulary or poetic terms being required. Each student was then left alone with a copy of the poem and a tape recorder and was finished when he or she had satisfied all possibilities of the poem. The time for the responses varied from twenty to thirty-five minutes.

In the directions to the students, we were scrupulously careful to allow them to read and respond in a completely unthreatening atmosphere. Here are the directions.

Directions for Reading

We would like to see how students your age read poetry on your own. This is a poem that is probably new to you. The name and dates of the author aren't given.

Read the poem any way that is comfortable to you. You should include both a line-by-line reading and your overall interpretation, in any order you wish.

Talk into the tape recorder about the poem. Feel free to say anything you think; don't censor your ideas. Thinking into a tape recorder may seem difficult at first; it's not the way you normally read a poem. Do your best to record all your thoughts. What does this poem mean to <u>you</u>?

Several readings may be necessary. Don't rush; give yourself time to think. There is no need to be talking all the while. You are finished when you've said all that you can about the poem.

Please tell the tape recorder:

If you change your mind as you go along.

If the poem reminds you of anything in your life.

If a stray thought comes to you.

This is not a test in any way. You are not being timed. There are no right and wrong answers. The poem will affect each reader differently.

The Process of Responding

There are two ways to analyze the records of individual responses, what are called protocols.

The first procedure is to take a single sticking point in the poem and study the various approaches to it by different readers. Essentially, the readers had no problems with the poem until they reached the phrase, "They watch me now." in the fifth stanza. As experienced readers, we thought the antecedents of "they" were obvious--the bald judge, the coach and team, and the safety man. It is instructive to see how each reader handled the problem of what "they" referred to, but an examination of how the readers interpreted the meaning of the pronoun "who" in the last stanza shows us in an even more revealing way the workings of their minds. Just who has always "horned your way through passages/Sat safe on the bench . . ./ Slipped out of arms . . ./ [and who should] Consider this poem a failure . . . ."?

This is how the five readers responded to the "You who . . . ." problem.

Martin doesn't directly address the "you" question and is later puzzled by the statement "Consider this poem a failure . . . ." He comes to regard you" as the reader in general.

Anita was admittedly confused by the stanza but doesn't mention syntax.

Emily, avoiding the syntax in which the "you" is embedded, at first thinks the boy is criticizing his own poem. Later she states that the "who" refers to her and others who haven't tried in life. "In the last stanza, the first three lines refer to the stanzas I mentioned, but I'm not really sure why . . . . Maybe he's referring to us who sit safe on the bench while he came naked to court." She concludes by saying, "I don't think this poem is a failure, but then again I haven't always horned my way through passages and stuff like it says in the last stanza."

Carol puts it this way: "Those people who did it all right the first time, who didn't mess up playing on stage; those people--who made the touchdowns and remembered their uniforms--they think that he is a failure, that his poem is a failure."

Steve tries to explain the stanza as a whole but doesn't undertake the "you" problem.

It is important to note that the readers' different conclusions about the meaning of the word "you" led to variant interpretations of the poem. Those who explored possible meanings for this key word, furthermore, were not necessarily more "correct than were those who sidestepped the issue, but those readers who did investigate the problem of the pronoun antecedents provided more specific interpretations with fewer unsubtantiated generalizations than did the readers who sidestepped the issue. What is also noteworthy is the fact that the readers decided what the passage meant in general and then tried to fit their interpretation of the meaning of words and of syntax to this initial conception.

The second way to analyze the process of responding to poetry is to study the protocol of a single reader. Emily's response is a profitable one to examine because she reveals in greatest detail her mental processes. As we listened to Emily's tape several times and read over and over again her protocol, we were able to perceive in a rudimentary fashion her functioning mind as she literally "works her way through" (her phrase) the poem and identified some eleven categories of her responding process, of which the eleven categories appear to fall into the broad elements of what we call PERCEIVE, INTERPRET, and ENJOY. We shall explain each of the eleven categories with examples from the protocol and then make some concluding remarks about the three overarching categories.

Stages in the Responding Process

1. Reads, Rereads, and Rereads. Emily reads and rereads words and phrases from the poem; to support her interpretations she continually returns to the text. (Reads the title. Reads first stanza aloud. "I'll read the second stanza." "Maybe I'll read the whole thing through, see if I can give a finish on it.")

2. Associates. First she associates words and phrases with her own personal experiences. ("This reminds me of a boy more or less having fun just as a boy does." "I feel that way every time we play Batavia. Maybe--yeah--that's what it means, 'A hundred miles by bus to a dressing room.'") She also associates items in the poem with her personal knowledge. ("'Boomed . . . thumbs,' refers to basketball." "Then 'Sprinted . . . dummy,' that sounds like football practice, because the guys all have to bump into that thing or whatever.")

3. Interprets. At the heart of Emily's response is interpretation; Emily interprets frequently and confidently, with her interpretations falling into several sub-categories. First, she hypothesizes interpretations. ("Maybe--it sounds like . . . ." "It could be all about the second stanza, I guess, means that pretty much as the first two lines in the first stanza." "The first two lines seem to be about this stanza." She questions her interpretations. (". . . or maybe it was his--coach? No, it wasn't his coach.") She admits her lack of understanding. ("I don't understand the part where it says, 'Gangling away from home.' I don't know what gangling means." "I still don't understand those two lines." "Well, I don't know too much about football. I don't know what a safety man is.") And as she works through the poem, gaining confidence through dogged persistence, she states interpretations of words, lines, stanzas, the literal and of figurative meanings of words, of themes, and of the meaning of the overall poem. ("And now I understand this. OK! 'I saw the bald judge . . . .' refers back to his first contest, with his cornet solo. I understand that now, too. I think that [horned] means like when you're playing an instrument and you fake your way through." "I'm not really sure if he means it [the title] literally or if he means it sarcastically. The only reason I think it may be sarcastic is the last line, 'Consider this poem a failure, sprawling flat on a page.'"

4. She restates, paraphrases lines in her own words. "He practices his instrument, coronet, in his garage, where he can do it as loud as he wants . . . ." "He was in his first contest playing a solo, and he blew up in the coda, on the stage, he was all by himself."

5. She frequently quotes verbatim from the poem. ("tackling a headless dummy." ". . . twisting like my hand-tied necktie.")

6. She responds emotionally. ("Oh! Maybe the first line . . . ." "OK! OK! so the first line . . . ." "And they're all watching him! That's neat!" ". . . ah! OK. I understand that, too."

7. She loops back. ("I think that first stanza all refers to him practicing . . . ." "The second line here probably refers to the third stanza, 'Under . . . uniform.'" "OK--the first line of the sixth stanza refers to the second stanza, where he was in his first contest, which refers up to the first stanza, where he practices his cornet. I think these all refer to the stanzas I mentioned, but I'm not really sure why."

8. She connects elements of the poem, both perceiving structures and creating her own structures. ("This is real interesting. In these three, it says his first contest, his first basketball game, his first football game." "Then 'Consider this poem a failure, sprawling flat on a page.' I think these all refer to the stanzas I mentioned, but I'm not really sure why.")

9. She generalizes, by creating her own overall meaning and stating general themes. ("I think these all refer to the stanzas I mentioned. Maybe he's referring to us who sit safe on the bench while he came naked to court.")

10. She revises her initial interpretations and evaluations. ("I think I understand up here in the first stanza, where I didn't understand the first time." "At first I didn't really like it; I thought it sounded kind of dumb. I mean, when I first read it I thought, No, this isn't right. But it's not a bad poem, and I think it's pretty good."

11. And finally she evaluates the worth of the poem, showing pleasure with her judgment. ("I think this is a good poem when you understand it." "I think it's a good title." "I think it's a good poem, and I don't think it's a failure.")

PERCEIVE, INTERPRET, AND ENJOY--these are the general processes Emily follows throughout her reading and responding to this poem. First, then, she enters into the poem, exemplifying what Coleridge termed the "willing suspension of disbelief," accepting in good faith the challenge to come to terms with this unfamiliar poem. Once she accepts the poem and, so to speak, makes a leap of faith, she proceeds step by step to interpret it, but her interpretations involve many false starts, mistaken first impressions, recursive movements, and tentative hypotheses, which she continually verifies by checking with specific words and phrases in the poem. Finally, when she feels satisfied with her creation of an overall meaning for the poem, she shows a well-deserved pleasure with her performance.

What is striking to us in this very superficial account of Emily's mental states is how incredibly complex the process is with even this short, fairly accessible poem. And what is equally exciting to us is the fact that Emily--with no prior instruction in the apparatus of literary criticism, with no knowledge of special terms for figurative language or the technical aspects of poetry--is able to "work through" and "understand" a poem in a way that is eminently satisfying to her.

Conclusions and Implications

1. The process of reading a poem is not a simple, easy, linear, instantaneous task. Students need to go through the process enough times to become familiar with it. In order to achieve a personal satisfaction, they might read a new poem, write out initial first draft impressions, discuss their reactions in small groups, and on the basis of the feedback they receive, create fully thought out responses. A good poem, one rich in meaning and sophisticated in structure, needs to grow on us--adults and adolescents alike.

2. Few students are aware of the processes available to them for a satisfactory reading of a poem. Students who say, "I don't like this poem. It's dumb." usually mean, "I don't understand this poem, and my teachers--who always know what every poem means--always make me feel stupid." Ignorance is frightening; knowledge is reassuring. This is no more true than with the reading of poetry. Although none of the adolescents in this study initially reported liking poetry, after they had worked through an interpretation of the poem, four expressed a liking for it. It is significant to note that this was the first time that any of the students had read a poem entirely on their own; several expressed surprise they could do so.

3. Individuals respond differently to the same poem, and there is nothing strange about this fact. Adolescents, furthermore, react differently from the way we experienced teachers do, and there's nothing wrong with this, either. High school students are very different from us English majors and experienced teachers in many immensely important ways. Such a statement sounds trivial, but it is terribly significant

for effective literature teaching. Young people have different cultural backgrounds from ours. They bring to reading and responding varied educational experiences. Few of them have acquired the critical apparatus for reading poems it took us years to assimilate. We sometimes forget these facts, but we shouldn't. This is not to imply that adolescents are unable to read poetry successfully. They can, as Emily demonstrated. If they are, however, to learn the critical apparatus for reading poetry confidently, and have confidence in their interpretations, we must anticipate the difficulties they face and adjust our teaching accordingly.

4. Within the limits of the agreed upon meanings held by a class of students and by the larger community, there are as many responses to a complex and sophisticated poem as there are students in a class. Helping high school students learn how to read and respond to poems on their own, of course, takes time. Although it is quicker and easier--on the surface--to tell students the "correct" meaning of a poem, that meaning becomes valid only for the teacher and never for the student. Students who never have the chance to interpret poems by themselves will always turn to the teacher for the "correct" meaning. The teacher who says or implies, "This is what the poem means. This is what the poet intended." leaves no opportunity for students to learn for themselves the process of creating personal meaning from poems.

Or for students to join our community of readers who have learned how to work through with confidence and exhilaration the process of reading and responding to subtle, complex, and meaningful language.

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